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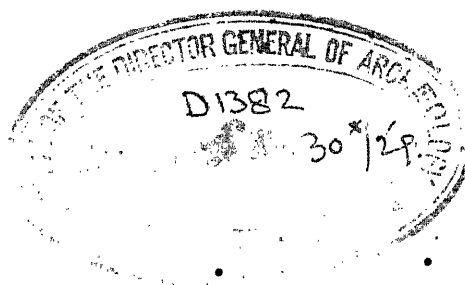
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THE ART OF THE
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OF BENGAL

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MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY

CALCUTTA MADRAS SHANGHAI

HUMPHREY MILFORD

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THE ART OF THE PAL EMPIRE OF BENGAL

J. C. FRENCH, I. C. S.



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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON : HUMPHREY MILFORD

1928



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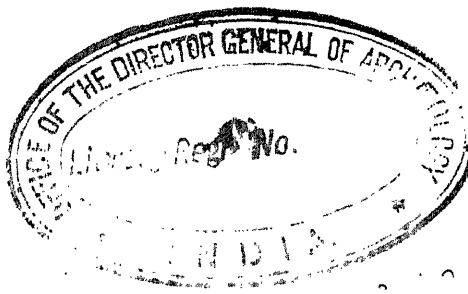
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P R E F A C E

THIS book is concerned solely with art. It does not profess to deal with iconography or history. For such historical setting as is necessary I have gone to such recognized authorities as Mr. R. D. Banerji's *Palas of Bengal*, the late Mr. C. J. Monahan's *Early History of Bengal*, Mahamahopadhyaya Hara Prasad Sastri's *Ramacarita*, the *Gaudalekhamala*, the *Journal of Punjab Historical Society*, Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Dass's *Indian Pundits in the Land of Snows*, Mr. N. G. Mazumdar's monograph on the Nalanda inscription of Devapala, &c. As regards the subject of this book, I must express my deep indebtedness to Mr. R. D. Banerji, who has placed his unrivalled knowledge at my disposal. I have also great pleasure in acknowledging the kind assistance of Sir John Marshall, C.I.E., Director General of Archaeology in India, Mr. Percy Brown, Director of the Art section, Indian Museum, Calcutta, Mr. Nalini Kanta Bhattashali, Curator, Dacca Museum, Mr. Hira Nandan Sastri of the Archaeological Department in India, Mr. Akhoy Kumar Maitra, C.I.E., President of the Varendra Research Society.

As regards the illustrations I am indebted to Mr. Nalini Kanta Bhattashali for II and XXIX. The rest are my own photographs, some of them taken for the first time.

The evidence for the dates assigned to particular sculptures is not confined to the photographs of dated images shown in the present work, though sufficient have been given for the purpose.

There also exist other dated images, of secondary artistic importance, which can be used from the point of view of style to check conclusions as to dates, and a list of them has been given at the end of the list of plates.

J. C. F.

December, 1927.

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THE ART OF THE PAL EMPIRE IN BENGAL

THE Pal dynasty reigned in Bengal during the Early Middle Ages in Europe, from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. When it arose, Bengal was divided among a number of petty kinglets, and for three centuries had been ruled thus, ever since the days of the great Gupta Empire, that classical age in Indian art and literature which came to an end with the invasions of the White Huns from Central Asia. The rise of the Pal dynasty marks the resurgence of art in Bengal.

A striking aspect of the Pal Age is the Tantrik system, one of the most startling and intricate elements of Hinduism. The word Tantrik comes from the Sanskrit *tan* 'to grow', 'to spread', and the aim of the system is to arouse the hidden spiritual forces lying dormant in the individual.¹ The ritual, which is based on the ancient Hindu sacred books, is designed 'to awaken the Kundalini or Sleeping Goddess (Sakti) within the body of the disciple, to the end that he may realize his own identity with the Devi, the great Mother or Goddess who is manifested through the Universe'.¹ As the cult spread among the mass of the people, prayer and meditation sometimes gave way to charms and incantations, and the narrow line which separates magic from mysticism was passed. It is this strange Tantrik cult which gives to the art of the Pal age its mysterious vitality and weird power

¹ Coomeraswamy.

and contrasts it so strongly with the classical spirit of the earlier art.

The rise of the Pal dynasty was preceded by a period of anarchy. We are told that 'the subjects forced the Goddess of Fortune on Gopala, to escape from the Law of the Fishes'.¹ 'The Law of the Fishes' is a favourite simile of ancient Sanskrit writers on political science when they wish to describe a condition of anarchy. Anarchy is said to be fishlike because the large fish prey at will on the smaller ones. Efforts to end this anarchy in Bengal were for a time futile. The Tibetan monk Taranath in his history of Buddhism gives the reason as follows: 'The widowed queen of a former King of Bengal murdered with poison every one who was chosen to be King, but after a certain number of years Gopala was chosen. He eluded her efforts to poison him, and became King for life.' This story would seem fantastic to European ears, but it is exactly paralleled in our own times in Tibet. The present Dalai Lama, the ruler of Tibet, is the first for some hundreds of years to reign for any considerable length of time. All his predecessors were poisoned. Like Gopala, the present Dalai Lama has eluded his poisoners. The throne which Gopala ascended was that of Gauda. This name is now applied to the ruins of a great city in the Malda district, but in ancient times it included the whole of Northern Bengal. Gopala, like all the rest of his line, was a Buddhist. A verse in the chronicle of the Ramacarita describes the Pal dynasty as 'the light of the race of the sea'.

¹ Khalimpur inscription.

The pedigrees on the inscriptions do not extend beyond Gopala's grandfather. 'As the sea is the source of the beautiful Goddess of Fortune, as the moon is the source of the splendour of light which illumines the world, so Dayitvishnu, sanctified by all kinds of knowledge, was born to be the father of Kings.'¹

The figure of the goddess Chandi (II) is an example of the art of the beginning of the Pal dynasty. It bears an inscription which gives its date as the eighth century. This image was found in the district of Tippera in Eastern Bengal, and was seen by the writer in a temple of Chandi, in the south-west extremity of the Lalmai Hills, a peculiar low range rising abruptly from marsh and ricefields. Now this image has disappeared, stolen by thieves. It was a gold-plated metal image, and doubtless it has been melted down for the fragments of gold on it. The photograph hardly does justice to the image, and the profile view was finer, but such as it is we must make the best of it as the only surviving record. The simplicity, dignity, and a certain immanent sense of life and vitality need no emphasis. The archaic smile recalls the art of Greece of thirteen centuries earlier.

The image of Vishnu (III) is of the same period. The elegance and strength of this figure, combined with the same mysterious sense of vitality which marks the first figure of the goddess Chandi, are characteristic of the early stages of Pal art. The perfect simplicity and restraint of the setting and scheme of decoration strike the eye, especially when contrasted with the florid over-elaboration so often associated with later images of

¹ Khalimpur inscription.

this character. The style of the art resembles that of the first figure of the goddess Chandi. This image was found on the site of the ancient city of Mahasthan. All that remains of Mahasthan nowadays is a vast mound a mile square, surrounded by a huge moat. The mound supports an Indian village, with its rice and brilliant yellow mustard fields, and only a vast pillar or massive block of stone protruding from the earth recalls the memories of its vanished glories. This mound, which rises straight up from the swampy plain, is an enduring evidence of the power and greatness of the Pal Empire. All the country round Mahasthan for some miles is full of traces of ancient remains. It resembles Delhi, Patna, and Malda in containing ruins and remains of more than one period. If but one-hundredth part of the time and energy expended every year on excavations in Egypt were applied to this region, what interesting results might not be obtained?

In one corner of the plateau of Mahasthan stands a Mahomedan mosque. The ancient Hindu carvings and figures on the walls, and even on the stones of the steep flight of steps which lead up from the plain, bear witness to the iconoclastic zeal of its architects and recall the days, evil to Hindu art, of Kala Pahar and his image breakers. Kala Pahar, according to local tradition in Bengal, was a Brahmin who joined the Mahomedans when they invaded Bengal, and in the destruction of images showed the zeal of a convert.

The next five figures (Plates IV to VIII) are assigned to the eighth century on two grounds, first, their affinity to the image

of the goddess Chandi (Plate II), which bears an inscription which fixes its date in the eighth century, and secondly because these images are obviously the logical sources and artistic ancestors of the later images which bear the name of Devapala, who reigned in the ninth century (IX, X, XI, XII). The figure of Lokanatha (IV) has, if our attention is not wholly occupied by the curiously magnified and distorted right hand, a strange archaic grace. This figure has another characteristic which is often found in archaic art. It is poised as if for flight, and resembles a winged figure which has only alighted for a moment. The figure of Durga (V) has a wild primitive vigour. The next two images of goddesses (VI and VII) are examples of the early Pal art. There is an upward surge in these figures. The scroll-work at the sides is a characteristic of Pal art. The youthful Siva (VIII) has an archaic charm which recalls primitive Greek art. The strange, enigmatic expression of the lips is almost reminiscent of the art of the ancient world, but it is needless to say that no direct Classical influence is apparent. The image is thoroughly Indian, in the full main line of descent of Indian art, and the resemblance to other arts is merely the result of similarity of aims and artistic and cultural conditions. All the examples of the Pal art of the eighth century have a singular power. There is in them the vigour and freshness of the primitive.

Gopala was succeeded on the throne by Dharmapala, whose reign covers the transition from the eighth to the ninth centuries. The word Dharmapala means 'Defender of the Faith'. Dharmapala extended his empire far over Northern India. He

conquered the Kingdom of Kanauj, deposed the King, and set up a vassal in his place. He was a reformer of the Buddhist religion. He married a Rashtrakuta princess. The Rashtrakutas occupied the Deccan, and Dharmapala sometimes allied with them in his wars against the Gurjaras, who occupied Rajputana and the Punjaub. A poet describes him as follows: 'King Dharmapala is like the Kalpataru (the Wishing Tree of Hindu legend that gives whatever is asked of it). What shall I say of him who is devoted to his faith, who rules the earth and is descended from the Ocean, who has the Moon for his friend?'¹ Dharmapala was famous for his modesty. He modestly bowed down his head when he heard his praises sung by the cowherds of the frontier, by the hunters of the forest, by the children at play, and even by the parrots in their cages.² He had a large army and navy and could easily throw a bridge of boats across the Ganges. In the reign of Dharmapala we find an inscription which seems to anticipate the oblivion into which the memory of the great Pal Empire has now fallen. 'Fortune is as flickering as a lightning flash, man is shortlived as the flame of a lamp, the world is full of sorrow, the infamy of the destroyer of others' glorious deeds, and the fame of the protector of them will last with the sun and the moon. Let future kings remember this, and do their will.'²

There exists a sculpture of the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu, which is dated the 26th year of the reign of Dharmapala. The workmanship is so much rougher than the figures

¹ Ghanarama.

² Khalimpur inscription.

which precede and follow that it is advisable to regard it as a crude example of the art, from which it is unsafe to draw extensive deductions or base elaborate theories.

Dharmapala was succeeded by Devapala, 'the Defender of the Gods', a warlike king, whose war-elephants penetrated the Vindhya Mountains, and whose war-horses visited their native home in the country of the Kambojas.¹ The Lord of Utkala, hearing Devapala's name from afar, fled, while the Lord of Pragjyotisha, accepting Devapala's commands, remained in peace and friendship. Devapala humbled the pride of the Huna, the Dravida, and the Gujara Kings.² 'The illustrious prince Devapala made tributary the earth as far as Reva's parent, whose rocks are moist with the blood of wild elephants, as far as Gauri's father, the mountain whitened with the rays of Isvara's moon, as far as the two oceans whose waters are red with the rising and the setting sun.'³

Devapala received an ambassador from the King of Sumatra.³

The political system of the Pal Empire appears to have been feudal in character. Lesser kings reigned in local areas under the Pal emperors. Such a system is in consonance with ancient Hindu political theory, and is supported by direct evidence from inscriptions. Thus Dharmapala is called the 'King of Kings',⁴ and we are also told that 'at the close of his victorious campaign

¹ Tibet. The phrase means that Devapala mounted his cavalry with Tibetan horses. Even nowadays there is a trade in horseflesh from Tibet and the Himalayas into Bengal.

² Monghyr inscription.

³ Nalanda copperplate.

⁴ Khalimpur inscription.

he removed the distress from the hearts of the conquered kings by rewards and by allowing them to return to their kingdoms.'¹ It was in Devapala's reign that there flourished the only two artists whose names have come down to us, Dhiman and his son Bitpalo. Taranath in his history of Buddhism tells us: 'In the time of King Devapala there lived in Varendra (Northern Bengal) an exceedingly skilful artist named Dhiman, whose son was Bitpalo; both of these produced many works in cast-metal, as well as sculptures and paintings which resembled the work of the Nagas. The father and son gave rise to distinct schools. In painting the followers of the father were called the Eastern school; those of the son as they were most numerous in Magadha (Bihar) were called followers of the Madhyadesha school of painting. So in Nepal the earlier schools of art resembled the old Western school; but in the course of time a peculiar Nepalese school was formed, which in painting and casting resembled rather the Eastern types.' This art in Nepal continues to the present day.]

Devapala's reign fell in the first half of the ninth century and was a great period of art. Works executed in his reign can be dated with singular precision, as we have no less than four images bearing his name as the reigning monarch (IX, X, XI, and XII). The image of Vishnu (X) is a magnificent example of Indian art. The design is perfect, and the whole figure is permeated with the fierce and mysterious significance

¹ Monghyr inscription. Further evidence is to be found in the Ramacharita, which describes how the feudatories came up to help Ramapala against the rebellion of the Kaibatrās or fishermen.

and vitality characteristic of this period of art. The figure is distinctly of a more developed type than the works assigned to the eighth century. But there is no hint of weakness or imitation or of a monotonously clever technique which lacks inspiration and therefore originality. In the reign of Devapala the Pal age reached its height, artistically as well as politically. The simplicity and vigour of the decoration and design of the images of Kuvera (the god of buried treasure, of ghosts, and of the underworld) and Hariti (who was the goddess of smallpox, and stole and devoured children until converted by Buddha) (XI and XII (1)) are worthy of attention.

The seated figure of Maitreya (XII (2)) has a certain suave elegance. The image of the preaching Buddha (XIII) is a magnificent expression of the spirit of Buddhism in its highest phase. This figure need not fear comparison with the greatest works of Buddhistic art of the Far East. The spirit of this work is completely Indian. Indeed, for all that the image is of Buddha, the face is that of a Brahmin of to-day or yesterday or three thousand years ago. The figure of Tara (XIV) has a singular grace and undulating rhythm. A contrast is the Vajrapani (XVII) who appears to be convulsed with laughter. The design of the figure of Lokanatha (XVIII) is striking in its simplicity and force. The work conveys an indefinable impression of power. The last of the images which can be plausibly assigned to the period of Devapala is the image of Ganesh (XIX). There is present in it the mysterious sense of life and vitality expressed in a strong simplicity of design, which is characteristic of this art.

No less than nine of the images which have so far been mentioned come from Nalanda, and are the fruit of the excavations which are now going on there. Nalanda was an ancient seat of learning in Eastern India. In the century preceding the beginning of the Pal dynasty we have accounts of the university, for such was this great Buddhist monastery, written by Chinese pilgrims. Hiuen Tsiang describes the foundation of the monastery in ancient times, and says:

‘A long succession of kings continued the work of building, using all the skill of the sculptor, till the whole is truly marvellous to behold.

‘The priests, to the number of several thousands, are men of the highest ability and talent. Their distinction is very great at the present time, and there are many hundreds whose fame has rapidly spread through distant regions. Their conduct is pure and unblamable. They follow in sincerity the precepts of the moral law. The rules of this monastery are severe, and all the priests are bound to observe them. The countries of India respect them and follow them. The day is not sufficient for asking and answering profound questions. From morning till night they engage in discussion; the old and the young mutually help one another. Those who cannot discuss questions out of the Sacred Books are little esteemed, and are obliged to hide themselves for shame. Learned men from different cities, on this account, who desire to acquire quickly a renown in discussion, come here in multitudes to settle their doubts, and then the streams of their wisdom flow far and wide. For this reason some

persons usurp the name of Nalanda students, and in going to and fro receive honour in consequence. If men of other places desire to enter and take part in the discussions, the keeper of the gate proposes some hard questions; many are unable to answer, and retire. One must have studied deeply both the old and the new before getting admission. Those students, therefore, who come here as strangers have to show their ability by hard discussion. Those who fail compared with those who succeed are as seven or eight in ten. The other two or three of moderate talent, when they come to discuss in turn in the assembly, are sure to be humbled, and to forfeit their renown. But with respect to those of conspicuous talent, of solid learning, great ability, illustrious virtue, distinguished men, these connect their names with the succession of the great men of Nalanda.' ¹

In the *Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*² there is a description of the buildings of Nalanda.

'A brick wall encloses the entire monastery. One gate opens into the great college, from which are separated eight other halls. The richly adorned towers, and the fairy-like turrets, like pointed hill-tops, are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the mist, and the upper rooms tower above the clouds.

'From the windows one may see the winds and the clouds, and above the soaring eaves the conjunctions of the sun and moon.

'And the deep, translucent ponds bear on their surface the

¹ *Buddhist Records of the Western World*. Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang by S. Beal.

² *The Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, by Shanans Hwui and Yen Tsung. Translated from the Chinese by S. Beal.

blue lotus, intermingled with flowers of deep red hue, and at intervals the groves spread over all their shade.

‘All the outside courts, in which are the priests’ chambers, are of four stories. The stories have dragon-projections and coloured eaves, the pearl-red pillars, carved and ornamented, the richly adorned balustrades, and the roofs covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades, these things add to the beauty of the scene.

‘The monasteries of India are counted by myriads, but this is the most remarkable for grandeur and height.’

I-Tsing, another pilgrim, says of Nalanda: ‘The lands in its possession contain more than two hundred villages. They have been bestowed by kings of many generations’, and, ‘In Nalanda monastery the number of priests is immense and exceeds three thousand; it is difficult to assemble so many together in one place. There are eight halls and three hundred apartments in this monastery’. He goes on to say that students pass two or three years in Nalanda monastery, where ‘eminent and accomplished men assemble in crowds, discuss possible and impossible doctrines, and after having been assured of the excellence of their opinions by wise men, become far famed for their wisdom.’¹ During the Pal dynasty we have no such direct accounts of Nalanda University, but inscriptions and dates on manuscripts show that it continued in existence throughout this period. The discovery of splendid works of art on this site is an indication

¹ *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as practised in India and the Malay Archipelago*, by I. Tsing Translated by J. Takakusun.

of the part played by this ancient university in the culture of the Pal age.

Devapala's successor handed over the kingdom to his son and ended his life as an ascetic. 'Let the vision be mine and the kingdom thine.'¹ The next five sovereigns are mere names, but images dated with the names of kings enable us to trace the course of the art with a fair degree of certainty. It is a downward course.

The inscriptions at the close of the ninth century reveal a curious fact. The name Mahendrapala appears. This Mahendrapala has no connexion whatever with the Pal dynasty of Bengal. He belongs to an entirely different Pal dynasty, the Pratihara one of Kanauj in Northern India. He invaded and occupied most of the territory of the Pals of Bengal, thus avenging a similar invasion of Kanauj by Devapala earlier in the ninth century. An inscription which has recently come to light in the excavations now going on at Paharpur in Rajshahi district in Bengal shows that Mahendrapala was in occupation of the very centre of the Bengal Pal Empire. An example of the art of this reign is to be found in plate XX. Judging by the style, the seated image of Buddha (XXI), which the writer photographed at daybreak on the summit of Gurpa hill in Gya district, is to be assigned to this period. The work is not without a certain force and merit, but a perceptible weakening and coarsening are apparent when it is compared with the art of Devapala's reign. On the grounds of style the image of Padmapani (XXII) is also assigned to this

¹ Bhagalpur inscription.

period. This figure conveys a strangely negroid suggestion. One feels that it would be more in place as a divinity on the banks of the Niger or the Congo than in the gallery of the Aryan art of India. May this suggestion arise from the democratic tendencies of Buddhism, which give outlet to races and forces in India other than Aryan?

After Mahendrapala's death his sons appear to have been recalled by wars to their northern home, and to have left the Pal kingdom in Bengal. Early in the tenth century Gopala II ascended the throne. A palm-leaf manuscript with illuminations in the British Museum (XXIII (1)) gives us an idea of the art of this period. It closely resembles the sculpture. While there is a certain charm in the grace of the figure and design and the rich colouring, the absence of vigour and energy in the line is evident. The lack of freshness makes such art soon cloy. Other examples of Pala painting of later reigns are to be found in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, in Calcutta, in the Boston Museum, and in the Cambridge University Library. They are important not so much for their artistic quality as for their function in assisting to bridge the gulf which was formerly said to exist between the Ajanta and the Rajput paintings. The seated Bodhisatva (XXIII (2)) is assigned on grounds of style to the reign of Gopala II. In spite of the charm of composition and design, a decided weakening is observable when compared with the earlier art. The next three plates are assigned by style to the tenth century. The head of Siva Bhairab (XXV) has a curiously Mephistophelian air and shows strong Tantric influence. The Lion on

the Elephant (XXVI) is a bold and impressive design, and is a fine example of the art of this period.

As the tenth century progressed, the fortunes of the Pal dynasty sunk to a low ebb, for the Tibetans invaded and occupied Northern Bengal. It is curious to trace in the art the consciousness of the artist that things were on a downward way, and to note the frantic efforts which were made to preserve the lofty standard of the earlier art. The door by which the modern artist would have escaped, a so-called return to 'nature' by the exact imitation of physical objects, was closed to him, both by tradition and by express injunction of the Sacred Books. He was under no illusion that his task was to portray other than gods. Better the image of a god, however crudely and unskilfully wrought, than the most cunning and lifelike statue of a man that human hand could portray. This desperate effort to maintain the standard of the great art of older days shows itself in exaggerated simplification and symbolism, carried even to the extent of distortion. A striking feature of statues of the tenth century is an abnormal and grotesque lengthening of the legs. An increasing stylization in the draperies of the statues is also a characteristic of this period. It gives a stiff and somewhat awkward effect.

Late in the tenth century came Mahipala, famous in Bengal song and story. He recovered the kingdom of his ancestors by driving out the Tibetans. Tradition ascribes to him great public works, but all that remains of them nowadays are tanks so vast as to resemble lakes, and mounds and ruins. A saying is still

current in Bengal which preserves his name: 'Dhan bhante Mahipaler gita', 'Songs of Mahipal while husking rice'. Mahipala repulsed Rajendra Chola, an invader from Southern India. In A. D. 1026 he did extensive repairs to the temples and shrines in Benares. The beginning of the vernacular literature of Bengal is ascribed to this reign. Buddhist songs in Bengali gave rise to the modern poetry of Bengal. Under Mahipala there was a distinct renaissance, and a strenuous effort was made to restore the great art of earlier days. But it is needless to state that the effort was unsuccessful. Art cannot be made to order, even at the royal command. There is no more ruthless mirror of the spirit and soul of a nation than its art. As the morale and essential vitality of a people wane, so does the art. The political, social, military, artistic, cultural entity which we call a people or a nation or an empire has a life just as an individual man has, and the Hindu Empire was on the downward way. In composition, workmanship, details, and finish the work of the artists of Mahipala's reign is by no means discreditable. All that it lacks is that mysterious element which is the life-breath of a work of art. Plate XXVII is an example of the art of this reign.

[Mahipala's reign appears to have continued for the first thirty years of the eleventh century. The principal event in the reign of his successor is the mission of Atisa to Tibet. Atisa was a principal monk in the Buddhist monastery of Vikramasila on the Ganges. Envoys came from Tibet and persuaded him to go to that country to reform the Buddhism there. It was about the year A. D. 1040 that Atisa said farewell to the head of the Vikra-

masila monastery. The latter was much dejected, and said that the signs promised evil for India, as numerous Mahomedans were invading the country. When Atisa on his way to Tibet got beyond the Nepal frontier, some Saivaites sent robbers to kill him. As soon as the robbers saw his face they were struck dumb and motionless as statues. Atisa said, 'I pity the robbers', and uttered some mantras and drew figures on the sand. The robbers were then restored to life. Further on, Atisa found some puppies dying on the roadside. He saved them, and their descendants are still to be seen at Rodeng in Nepal, a special breed. In honour of Atisa's arrival in Tibet the long trumpets, which are such a characteristic feature of religious ceremonies in that country, are said to have been sounded for the first time. The following story is told of Atisa and one of his disciples. The disciple was starting on a journey, and with his alms-bag in his hand was bidding farewell to his master Atisa. Suddenly, the disciple changed himself into a wolf, and devoured a corpse lying on the roadside. Then in a flash he turned himself into human shape again. Atisa said: 'Now you can practise what form of worship you please'. Atisa condemned the Tantric system for Buddhists, and once said, 'It is not good for a Buddhist priest to have learnt a Tantric charm from a heretic'.

In this reign an ominous event took place. The bazaars of Benares were looted in a raid by Nyaltogin, Mahomedan governor of Lahore.

Later on in the eleventh century there was a formidable revolt against the Pal dynasty by the Kaibatras, or fishermen. The

name of one of the leaders, Bhim, is still preserved in Central Bengal by a vast embankment which traverses the district of Bogra from north to south, passing close to Mahasthan in the centre. From long exposure to sun, wind, and rain this embankment has weathered to a hardness resembling stone, and forms a striking contrast to the soft alluvial plain on either side. Bhim was defeated and killed by Ramapala, the great-grandson of Mahipala. Ramapala is the hero of the Sanskrit poem Ramacarita. A couplet in the Ramacarita tells us that the art of Bengal has put into the shade the art of Southern India. The author of the Ramacarita bursts into a lyrical description of the glories of Gauda under Ramapala, how there was a great statue of Siva, and statues of Kartikeya, the god of war, and Ganesh, the elephant god, and a lofty temple to the eleven Rudras (the gods of storms and waste places). There was also a great Buddhist monastery at Jaggaddala. Ramapala attacked Utkala, and ruled the country up to Kalinga, and his armies conquered Kamrup. His principal minister was descended from the ministers of earlier Pal kings. The office seems to have been hereditary, as it is in Nepal to-day. Ramapala committed suicide by drowning himself in the Ganges.

The last King of the Pal dynasty was Ramapala's third son Madanapala, who ascended the throne after the murder of the reigning King, his nephew.)

When the writer was in Punjaub Hill States recently he came across a curious and unexpected echo of the Pal dynasty. There is a strong and continuous tradition that the ruling families in

certain states are descended from 'the Rajas of Gaur in Bengal'. These states are Suket, Keonthal, Kashtwar, and Mandi. In these ancient Rajput states tradition has immense force and accuracy. Of Kashtwar it is related that 'Kahan Pal, the founder of the State, with a small band of followers, arrived in the hills in order to conquer a kingdom for himself. He is said to have come from Gaur, the ancient capital of Bengal, and to have been a cadet of the ruling family of that place.'¹

{ About the beginning of the twelfth century the Pal dynasty was finally overthrown, and was succeeded by the Sens. }

During the Pal Age Buddhism and the Brahminical form of Hinduism existed peacefully side by side, but in the twelfth century under the Sens we find a certain reactionary tendency on the part of the Brahmins against the democratic and vulgarizing spirit of Buddhism. The Buddhist priests had already, in the latter part of the tenth century, begun to write books in Prakrit (the popular form of Sanskrit). This Prakrit was called by the Brahmins, Paicachi Prakrit, or the Prakrit spoken by the evil spirits. So we find the Brahmins of the Sen age condemning the use of the vernacular language in religion, which the Buddhists had encouraged. 'Who hears the eighteen Puranas or the Ramayana recited in Bengali will be thrown into the hell called Rourava.' The Brahmin opposition was not mere

¹ *Journal of Punjab Historical Society*, vols. iii, iv, and vii. The suggestion that these Punjab Hill rajas are descended from the Sen kings is impossible on chronological grounds. Cunningham's suggestion (*Archaeological Survey Report*, vol. xv, p. 136) is mere surmise, entirely unsupported by evidence. The Pals were the only Hindu rulers of Bengal to have relations of importance with Northern India. The words 'Pal' and 'Sen' were titles of dynasties in various parts of India.

jealous exclusion. There was a genuine fear that religious truths might be perverted or degraded and the ceremonies lose dignity by feeble or incorrect translations. In Sanskrit the ancient tradition was preserved inviolable. Of course the decline in Buddhism had started before the Sen dynasty or the twelfth century. Thus Atisa, a hundred years earlier, had to go to Sumatra to complete his studies in Buddhism. But in the art of the period there is little sign to be found of this Brahminical reaction. Many Buddhistic images belong to the Sen period, and the style of the art is merely a continuation of the decline observable in the later Pal art.¹ There is an image of Chandi in Dacca, which bears the date of the third year of the reign of Laksman Sen, the last of the Sen line. It was upon the court of this King at Nadia in A. D. 1199 that Bakhtiyar Khilji burst with his Arab troopers, and the Hindu Empire in Bengal vanished like a dream. The utter weakness and degeneracy of the art of this reign tell their own tale.

Yet the Sen dynasty has served until the last few years as a complete veil to its great predecessor, the Pal Empire. When the whirlwind of the Mahomedan invasion had subsided, it was found that though Mahomedans were kings of Bengal, still Hinduism survived. But the Hindu was a Brahmin. Buddhism had disappeared. And so when the Hindu looked back to the Golden Age when he was the sole ruler of Bengal, it was to the orthodox Sen kings, the patrons and followers of the Brahmins,

¹ It is interesting to note that a stone inscription of the first Sen king discloses the existence of a guild of artists in Bengal.

that he turned. It is by searches in the libraries of distant monasteries in Nepal, and by the spade of the archaeologist, that the veil which has hidden the Pal Empire is beginning to be broken.

Plates to XXVIII to XXXII are examples of Pal architecture. Plate XXVIII is the temple traditionally ascribed to Ichhai Ghosh, the hero of the medieval poem *Dharmamangala*. It is situated in the middle of a jungle, on a high spur of land on the bank of the Ajai river. The sandy bed of the river, framed in high tiger grass, presents a typically Indian scene. The beautiful temples of Barakar (XXIX to XXXI) have a distinct affinity to the medieval architecture of Europe. In the smaller temple at Barakar is seen the slender grace characteristic of this art. The doorway of the Pal temple at Telkupi (XXXII) has a certain mysterious beauty.

Such is the art of the Pal Empire in Bengal. How is it related to the older art of India? A comparison of the first and second plates in this book answers this question. The first plate (I) is a figure of Buddha of the Gupta period, found in Rajshahi district in Bengal, not far from the centre of the Pal Empire. In time this figure is about four centuries earlier than the beginning of the Pal Empire. It is a fine example of the art of the Gupta Empire, meditative as opposed to passionate, subtle and delicate, and without the heaviness which mars some examples of this art. With what perfection is suggested the idea of immateriality, of some spiritual presence only half materialized into concrete form. With the second plate (II), the figure of Chandi, with which we

are already familiar, we are in a different world. The image is tense, lively, active, and filled with a certain mysterious vital force. What is this force? It is the manifestation of the spirit which marks the revival of Hinduism following the repulse of the invasion of the White Huns in the sixth century. The Sleeping Goddess has awakened. It is needless to say that the Tantrik system is referred to, that strange flower of Hinduism, ranging from spirituality and mysticism to secret rites and magic, the counterpart of India's own Himalayan mountains, with their snow-crowned peaks above and impenetrable jungles below. This strange force permeates Pal art, and gives it a weird power.

The fourth plate (IV) also shows how we have travelled from the Classical to the Medieval. With this figure we are in the world of elves and gnomes and fays. The figure of Ananta Narayana (XXIV), Vishnu lying on the Snake, is far removed from another figure of the same deity made during the Gupta period and to be seen in the temple of Deogarh, in the Jhansi district. It is the difference between a Roman Classical figure (such as Endymion) and the crusader of the medieval tomb.

How does this Palart compare with contemporary art in other parts of India? The sculptures of Ellora and Elephanta spring to the mind, for they are directly contemporary with the earliest and finest period. There is a decided affinity between the two arts. Both belong to the passionate rather than the meditative spirit in art, and are medieval as opposed to the Gupta classicism. But in the Pal art the Tantrik element appears more strongly

than in the art of Central and Western India. In Chandi (Plate II), the Snake image of Vishnu (Plate X), and Avalokiteswar (Plate XV) the Tantrik influence is strongly marked. The figure of Tara (XIV) is closely related both in style and spirit to some figures of goddesses in the famous Kailasa cave at Ellora.

It seems extremely probable, though the point has not yet been definitely established, that the Hindu art of Java is to be derived from Bengal. Though this may be so, still the differences between the two arts are striking and interesting. The art of Java, the work of artists resting safe, after the perils of their voyage from India, in a soft and enervating climate, seems to dissolve into a soft luxuriance. The art of the Pal Empire is more virile. It possesses a tense and nervous character absent from the softer art of the South. There is the element of austerity, the suggestion of Himalayan grandeur.

The Pal Empire at its height was contemporary with the great Tang Empire in China, and a comparison of the two arts irresistibly suggests itself. Buddhism came from India to China, and in many Chinese Buddhistic images it is not surprising to be able to trace certain Indian influences. It is now admitted that during the period with which we are concerned there was direct intercourse between India and China by sea, and that this intercourse was not confined to trade and commerce, but extended also to culture and the arts.¹ Superficially, the resemblance between certain examples of the arts of the two empires is so strong as to justify the idea that the Chinese is a copy of the Indian. It may

¹ Professor Pelliot, Lecture before the India Society, November 1925.

be asked why such a resemblance might not lead to the opposite conclusion, namely, that the Indian artists had been copying the Chinese. The answer is a simple one. The Indian figures are the natural and logical outcome of the previous course of Indian art, and no break in artistic continuity is discernible in their case. This is not so with the Chinese figures, which in their resemblance to Indian models represent a sudden and abrupt departure from ancient Chinese tradition.¹

But these similarities, striking though they may be, are only superficial, and between the art and culture of India and China there is a wide gulf. Buddhism threw over a temporary bridge, but on the one side was the ancient Brahminical culture, and on the other Taoism, both of which express the essential inmost genius of the countries in which they arose. The greatest art of China is to be found not in Buddhistic art, but in the Taoist works of men and animals and landscape painting, sometimes asserted to be the greatest landscape painting in the world. It cannot be denied that in Buddhistic art India excels China to the same extent as that in which she is herself excelled by China in the Taoist masterpieces of Nature. The Chinese artist looks to the powers of the outside universe for his inspiration, and defines his goal as Spiritual Rhythm. The Indian seeks within himself

¹ Examples of Tang copies of Pal art are to be found in M. Oswald Siren's work on Chinese Buddhistic Sculpture (Plates 374 B, in which the pose and drapery is Indian, 375, 376 B, 377, and 539, in which the torso and rigidly straight legs are derived from Pal statues, and 409 B, 419 C, and 542 B, seated figures obviously derived from Indian models.) The small bearded figures at the side of the Bodhisatva (XXIII (2)) are to be found copied in Chinese Buddhistic art. It is interesting to compare the Pal temples (XXIX and XXX) with the Tang pagoda (Oswald Siren, *Chinese Buddhistic Art*, plate 423).

the hidden means to penetrate through the superficial haze of things to the inner reality. Both arts are transcendental in spirit, but they attain to their destination by different roads; Rhythm as opposed to Yoga.¹

The relation of Pal art to the art of later times remains to be considered. As noted by the monk Taranath in his history of Buddhism, the art of Nepal was deeply influenced by the artists of the reign of Devapala, and this Nepalese art continues to the present day. Buddhism in its present form was introduced into Tibet by Atisa in the reign of Nayapala, and Tibetan art on its Indian side is obviously derived from Pal art. The seated figures both in metal and colour (XII (2) and XXIII (1)) are obviously the ancestors of the art of the Tibetan temple banners and images of the present day. The strong Tantric element in Tibetan Buddhism is due to its origin from Pal Bengal, and the same remark applies to the Buddhism of Darjeeling and other Himalayan countries adjoining Bengal. In view of the complete disappearance of Buddhism from India it is curious to note that nowadays in Nepal the Brahminical form of Hinduism is forcing the Buddhist religion northwards.

The relation of the Pal art to the later art of India is a profoundly interesting study. Between the two arts is the whirlwind

¹ Yoga, a typically Indian practice, has been briefly defined as follows : 'Yoga (meaning Union, literally Yoking) is designed and calculated to induce desirable states of consciousness, culminating in perfect experience (*samadhi*), where subject and object are identified, the illusion of plurality disappears, and unity with the Atman is realized. The method is one mainly of concentrated attention and visualization. . . . The essential part of art, the visualization, is thus a kind of *Yoga*, and the artist is sometimes referred to as a *Yogi*.' (Coomeraswamy.)

of the Mahomedan invasion. While deploring the fearful destruction of priceless monuments of ancient culture and art during the struggle, it must be frankly admitted that Hindu art at the time of the Mahomedan invasion had reached a thoroughly corrupt and decadent stage, and the abrupt termination of its downward course is in itself by no means to be deplored. When the storm of the Mahomedan invasion subsided, we find Hindu art springing up again in new and strange forms like the spring flowers after the winter. A hint of how this change took place is to be found in a manuscript from Nepal of the end of the twelfth century.¹ If the pictures in this manuscript be compared with those of the period of Gopala II (XXIII (1)) it will be seen that in the main the Nepalese pictures follow the tradition of the Pal art. But the two seated figures (with a background of blue night studded with stars) painted on each side of the wooden cover of the manuscript strike a fresh note. They have a different line and spirit, a suggestion of the later Primitives, a hint of barbaric simplification accompanied by barbaric vigour, something of the difference between the art of the Roman Empire and the Romanesque.

¹ Now in the British Museum, Or. 3345.

PLATES



Buddha

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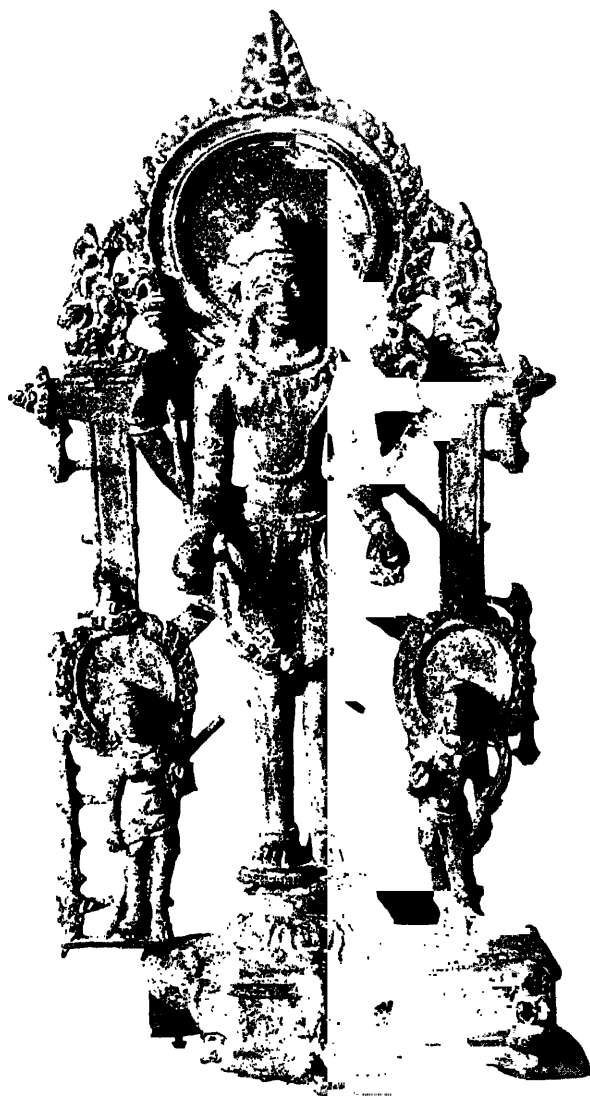
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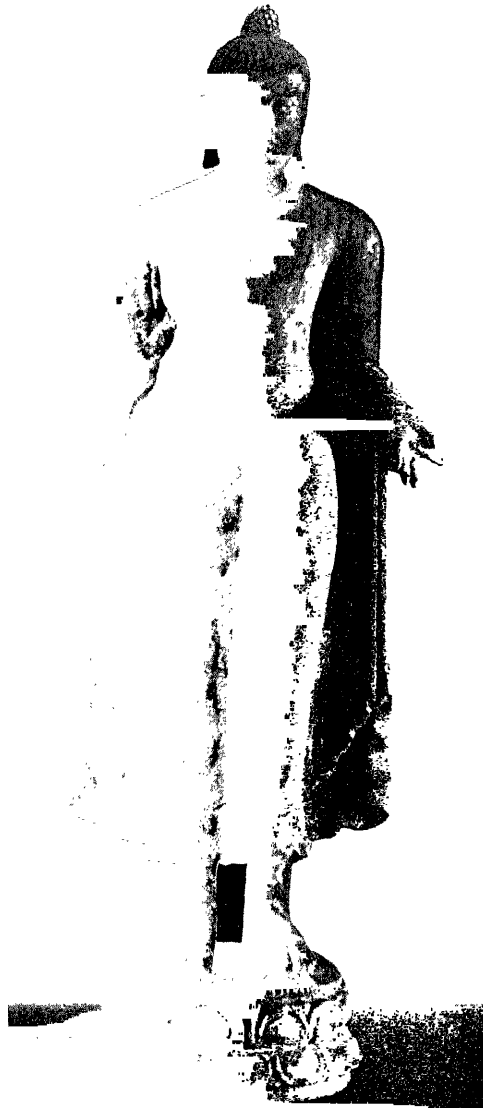
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Buddha

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Aravali Kishan

XV

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Tana

XVI

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Vajrapani

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XVIII

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Ganesh

XIX

92



Tana.



Buddha



Padmapani

XXII



Bodhisattva

XXIII (1)



Bodhisattva

XXIII (2)



Sheshashayi Vishnu

XXIV



Bhairav

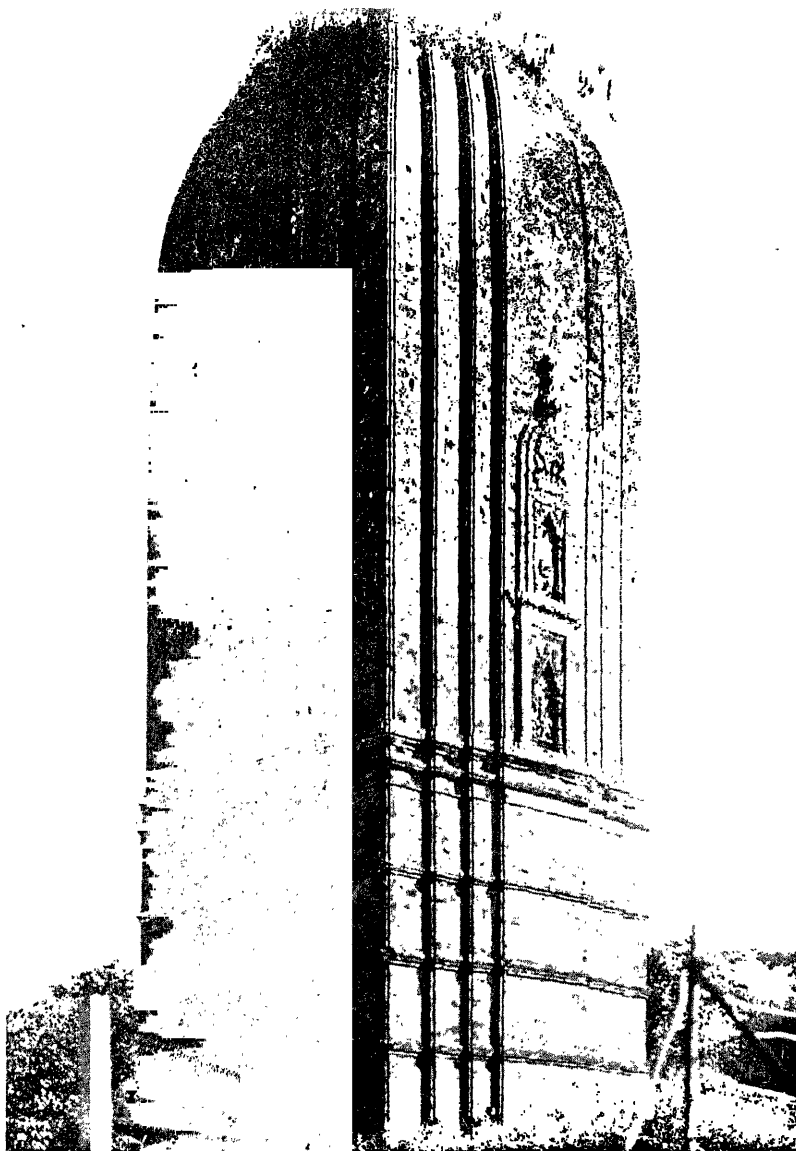
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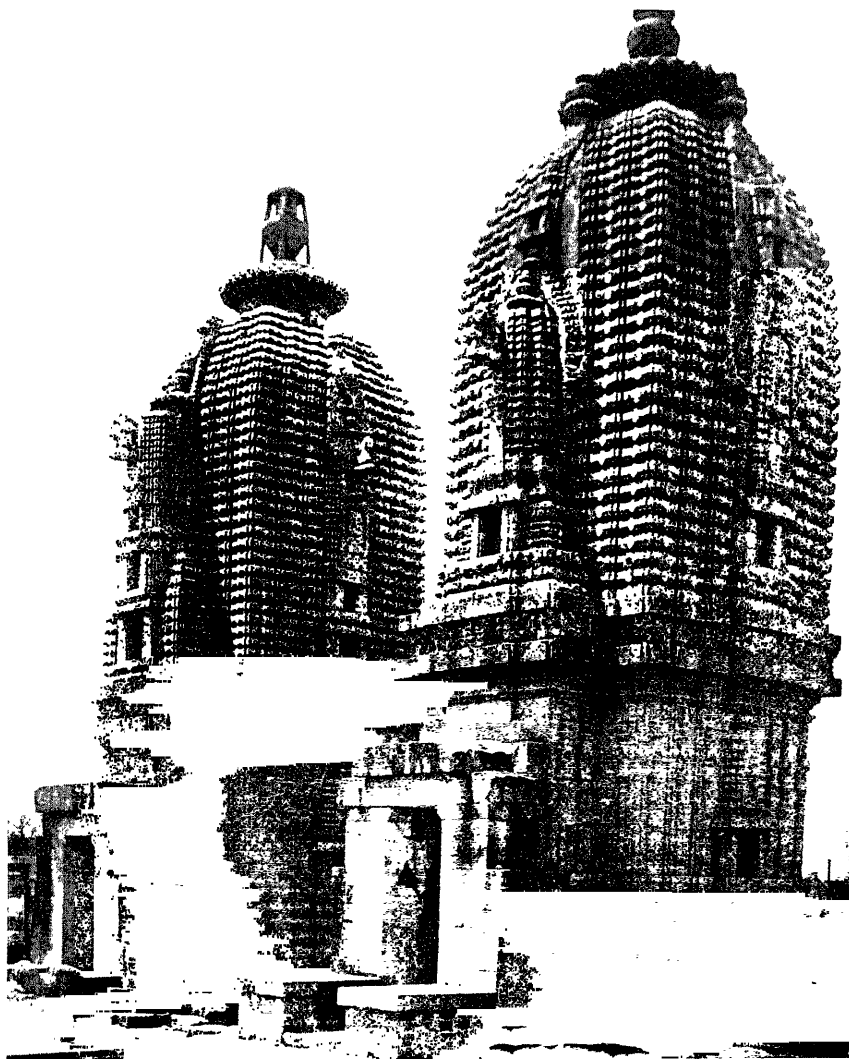


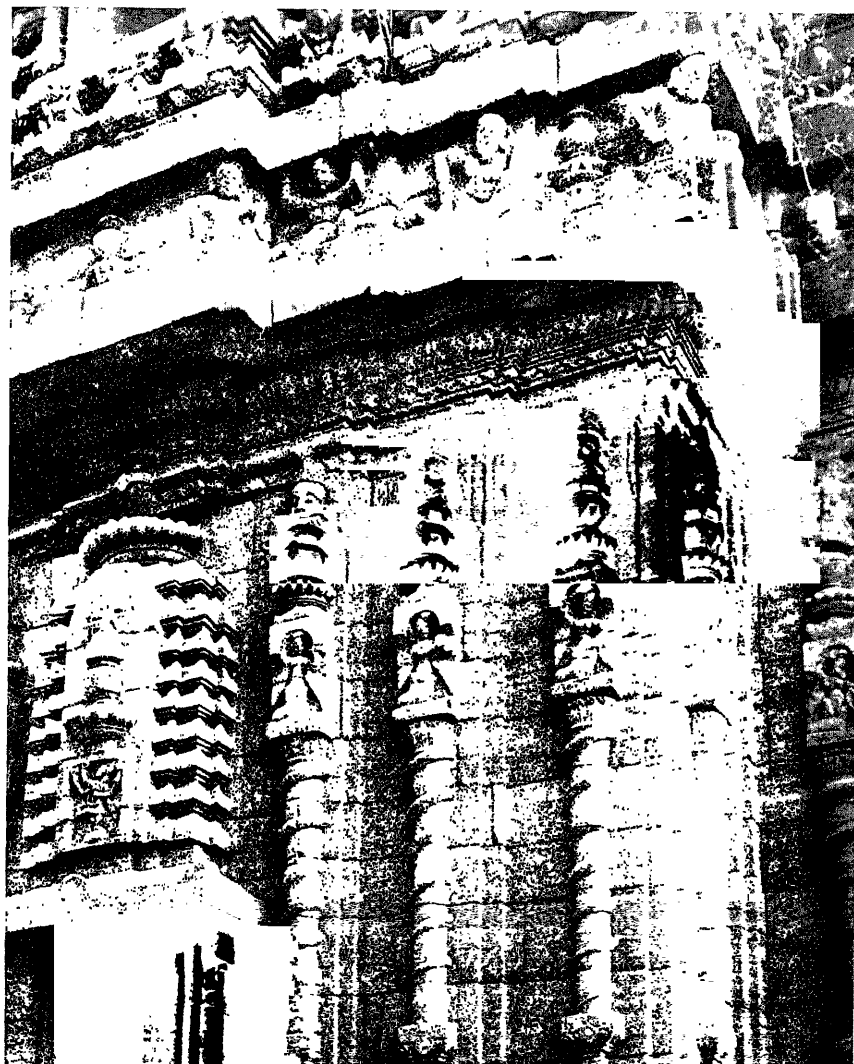


Vishnu



XXVIII





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